Sketch

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Nepal

Margaret Shepherd*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

This is hard new country. Tigers still Breathe softly in the jungles I am told. Tales of revolution still unfold Half echo and half legend...

Nepal

by Margaret Shepherd

Special Student

I

This is hard new country. Tigers still
Breathe softly in the jungles I am told.
Tales of revolution still unfold
Half echo and half legend.
Peasants kill
A little goat to please the gods who might,
Or might not, at their whim, destroy the rice.
"Because it's there," presumptuous climbers go;
In answer, proud young mountains push their snow
On those whose hands and steel lay claim to stone
Like birthright.
The hills of Nepal are grounded
In rain forest, with their shoulders under mountain
Feet. This rise from jungle flesh to bone
Of mountain is the slope of going inside.
I am climbing not because it is there
—many other things are there—but this is where
I am; my path slopes up the same incline.

II

On maps, an inch of distance looks like fun.
"Do you feel up to walking fifteen hours?
Do you have salt? Food? Water? You must take
A good strong hat to shield you from the sun."
I protest that I will be all right
But ask if I can stay another night
To rest. How will I ever find my way?
I stand ashamed. I don't know what to say.

The question hangs all evening while I eat
And talk and move my bags in and unpack
Enough for now: a washcloth for the shower,
A hairbrush and a light bathrobe of cotton.
I've washed and brushed and dressed and started back
To go to bed and shut my eyes awake
Against the changing answers how to meet
This walk. How can I even think of failing
When I have told the doctor I would come
And be of help? I have to think of some
Way out of this, or into this—
I see
One more person talking than before.
"You must meet each other . . ." this drill command
Of etiquette snaps my training to attention;
My head is still off duty. I find my hand
Shaking hands across a voice that mentions
Climbing foothills . . . Tansen . . . the Peace Corps . . .
Suddenly these floating parts cohere.
He has climbed before and knows the trail
And has been planning soon to go again.
"This makes a good excuse."
"It seems to me
That I'm imposing—"
"No, I'm just a lonely
Volunteer two years away from any
American girls. There haven't been too many
Of your age trekking through. We have forgotten
How to even talk to one of them . . ."
Is speech the final reason or the only?

III

A trail gives its mountain up to those
Whose strength is in their feet and not their luck.
We meet the British Ambassador on the day's
First river fording. He says hello and asks,
"How's the pace for her?" and then we laugh;
"She manages to keep up, anyway."
He knows I'm tired, but he will not say

Anything to take my pride away.
Mutually pretending he's the one
That's tired, we sit under a tree and wait
For me to catch my breath. I learn a joke;
"Describe this country in one sentence."
"Up!"
I lift my feet slowly, walking with the gait
Of someone under water and in pain.
"This last one is hardest, this hill is the worst
Because you can see Tansen as you climb
And somehow it seems farther all the time."

IV

A line of children, patient in the thirst
Of dusty hills neglected by their rain-
gods, stray from the water dance to stare
At us. One offers half a branch to me
Picked from some great dust-watered shade tree.
Green leaves in the fingers of the mind can make
Feet lighter. But the magic of the broken
Branch wears out and droops. The gods have chosen
Not to send rain, and not to help me walk.

A light blinks on. A door begins to talk.
The last four are the steepest steps of all
Up to the house. Up like cliffs to where
Slope levels out to living in Nepal.

V

Michael the archtrumpet starts the morning.
Slow, I open, face-into-brightness.
The pillow
Is all I see at first, then one great yellow
Window—an answering note from the French horns.

He comes, well insulated by some friends,
To say good-bye; tomorrow he will go
To break his own paths, out where each new snow
Finds old snow frozen. We walk out to look
Across the hills to where the clouded sky

Piles granite peaks of cloud, and there the high
Mountains float on foothills. I have to ask.
"You're going there?"
"In that direction, yes."
"Up?"
"No, around."
"How long?"
"Five weeks, I guess."
"I'll see you in the city then if you
Should be there." Now the conversation ends
By shaking hands, a funny thing to do
To hide one's feelings, something I have learned
From Europeans, how to just adjourn
Two people, at arms' length and with two smiles.

I wake to no trumpet and walk out today
But cannot see the mountains through the shapeless mist across the intervening miles.

VI

He didn't come again. He stayed three days
In town and let our premature good-bye
Stand. And for a while I wondered why . . . .

The drip of insect noise unnerves the night.
Rocks grate unexpectedly and raise
Fears like shadows. Night is nothing else.
Footsteps from outside the hospital door
Emerge into a man—with grief and fright
Stark on his face—whistling to scare away
The evil spirits making noise outside.
The doctor takes the old blanket from the man
Gently. But his woman's touch cannot hide
A doctor's knowledge that the baby is dead.

I ask about this later.
"There is more
To this than coming premature . . . ." His hands
Open. "This one had a chance. There are ways
To save an early baby. Just the barest threads of life can hold; clothed, rested, fed,

And shielded from extremes, there's no excuse
For losing one.
But what did her father do?
He carried her in the day's most cruel heat
From compounder to compounder, and each
One said he could not cure her—"
"Why didn't they
Bring her at the very first to you?"
"Yes, or why not simply let her be?"
He leaves, unable to bear the company
Of people who are anxious to abuse
A frail thing dear to them until it dies.
The night of rocks and shadows doesn't scare
Me. Dark is cool and safe and made of stone.
The gift of quiet night is given in being
Left—three days and now—by myself . . .
The gift received in knowing that a thing
Born too early must be left alone.

VII

I find a good book hidden on a shelf
Of books I thought that I'd already seen.
(This, as I recall, is one that he
Said I could not read until I'm twenty.)
But I take it down and page in it a while
On the front porch steps, humming to myself,
And wondering what the great ideas mean.

I stretch my legs out in the sun to tan
And just enjoy how tall and free I am
To be reading books I don't understand.

Uneasily, then, the bricks beneath me move
Like hands, and settle. I jump up and look
In disbelief. My eyes and fingers prove
That nothing changed. It must have been the book.

VIII

Tonight the doctor turns the light on.
"I know this must sound strange, but today
I thought I felt an earthquake in the air.

Nothing, of course, like one that hit the town
Some years ago. I could be very wrong,
But I felt something shake. What do you say?"

I stop in the drumming fingers of a song
To reconsider the earthquake and the book
Upon the steps, and further back in the age
Of seven days ago, someone who took
The time to recommend the book to me.

"It was," I say, and in that voicing of
My great belief in earthquakes and in pages,
I realize that I have been in love
Finally and for the last time.
But it seems
Always the last time for the child of dreams.

IX

We make iced coffee every afternoon.
She stirs it with a little silver spoon
That came from London. I set out the cream
And take the doctor's coffee down to him.

An acorn sound comes bobbing on the breeze
Like an old philosopher by a tree
With gentle hiccups; something like the slim
Soft echo of a tapestry Chinese
Pagoda monk who taps an ivory gong
Calling the faithful to worship with his song.

The doctor laughs. "Down there beyond Tansen
Someone runs a mustard oil machine
Which has a pipe for letting off the steam,
And someone else has put a hard clay pot
Over the vent.
"It's not an old man, then?"
"People like to think so, but it's not
So picturesque. Just mustard advertising."

Tonight three-quarters of a moon is rising.
We three people watch the hundred valleys
Of every changing shadow. "This is really
My favorite time of night," the doctor yawns;
His wife nods yes in turn. I lean my head
Against the open door. A small bird calls
And answers. They stand up and go to bed.

Still later, when we're all asleep and gone,
The mustard press taps on and on and on.

X

I see the valley well enough all day
By sunlight, just as everybody else
And go to bed at night.
But if we stay
Up late to talk to each other or ourselves,
The doctor knows the right request—to make
To just the right custodian, who turns
The generators on. The light bulbs burn.
The evening's conversation is a race
Against those lights; the switch man doesn't take
Light—or darkness—seriously, won't wait
To hear if we are ready. He flips the switch
Just once to warn us. Then we run to fetch
Matches and kerosene lamps and get them lit
Before the little man can black the lights.

Sometimes he blinks them once and goes to sleep
(We think) and leaves them on. We say good night
And everyone goes home. And then we sit
Wondering whether to laugh or cry at it,
This leftover time of light that can't be lived in.

But sometimes the custodian seems to lose
His patience, and he seems to try to catch us
With darkness while we're looking for the matches.
With unlit lamps, we watch the room go black

And wish the little light switch man had given
Us time to light them, following his warning.
Our guests must go away and wait for morning
To talk of lighted things when they come back.

XI

We take a picnic lunch out to a tree
And sit, the doctor and his wife and me,
Our backs to the sunlight drying on the hills.
"This," she says, "is where we came to talk
About our last child's name, what it would be.
And here we sat and rested from the walk,
Under this tree, ten years ago, and still
I cherish it."
"Wasn't it over there?"
"These trees have moved around the last few years.
But it was here, and he was first of all
The few foreign babies born into Nepal.
Anyway, there's this important tree
Nearby, where we decided then that we
Would name him for this place where he would live,
A Nepali middle name; but of course he'd have
A Christian first name, one for going back
To where he'll put his roots down."
We eat
Our picnic lunch and give the plastic sack
To a small brown boy and stand to go.
"Those are his parents up there on the hill
Plowing their field and hoping they can grow
Enough to keep themselves and him alive.
The average person dies at thirty-five. . . ."

The path soon doubles back above the boy
And I can linger near the edge and see
Him through the branches, playing with his toy,
Pensive, like Buddha under the bo tree.

XII

I don't enjoy good-byes. They have no present.
They are the gloomy wreaths of the unpleasant-
ness of being the body at my own

Funeral. I wish they'd just bury me
As my sister did once; she put me on the train
And stood outside the window making very
Funny faces, pretending to invoke
Some grave and sympathetic thought. It was plain
We could not hear each other, so no one
Had to mourn.
If you want to talk, the last
Two hours will get you nowhere. You must leave
And come back later if you want to say
Something new.
I really would much rather
Assist in the delivery room than stay
Around while they inter my earthly remains.
Farewell parties should provide a shot
Of local anaesthetic for the pain
Of finding out that taking leave of friends
Boils down to my impatience to begin
This next rebirth and pinch the old life off.

Muskrat Ramble

by Douglas Thompson

Fisheries and Wildlife Biology, Sr.

FERGUS was a Swede, and he'd been trapping Iowa marshes and streams for most of his fifty-five years. His hands showed the scars he'd earned learning how not to handle muskrats, and his fingers were swollen from years of plunging them into half-frozen water to make a set or recover a trap. You didn't have to tell Fergus that trapping was a dog eat dog way to make a living. He'd been cheated, shot at, robbed, and tricked too often to think his fellow trappers were just a sweet bunch of petunias. He'd learned what survival meant.